

## Seven Speaking Activities with Emojis

by IRINA NOSOVA

**LEVEL:** Low Intermediate and above

**TIME REQUIRED:** It depends on the activity and the learners' language ability; the basic activities require about 10 or 15 minutes, while the advanced activities require 30 minutes or more, especially with activity extensions.

**GOALS:** Various; goals for each activity are listed in the activity descriptions below.

**MATERIALS:** Cell phones, if possible; otherwise, pencils or markers or pens and paper will be fine (optional: smart board or projector and slide).

### BACKGROUND:

Emojis are so deeply rooted in the norms of everyday communication today that we might deem certain emoji-less texts dry and even hostile. Using and interpreting emojis correctly is a necessary, yet underestimated, soft skill. In this article, I invite you to incorporate emojis into nontrivial classroom speaking activities that are fit for nearly every age and level of English skill.

For some activities, you might want to ask learners to use their smartphones if that is allowed in your school (surely, teenagers would be ecstatic to use their phones during the lesson). In case some learners don't own or don't have smartphones with them, pair those learners with classmates who do. Alternatively, if your school does not

allow students to use their phones or even take them inside the school building, you can find images of emojis to show using a smart board or a projector. If none of the above suggestions is applicable, you can just ask learners to draw emojis, which are generally simple and require little time to depict. No phones needed in this case—just paper and something to draw with.

All activities are suitable for pair work, group work, or a mingle. It would be ideal if you are able to introduce the activities with a personal example. Before starting, you also might want to caution students against using certain (impolite or inappropriate) emojis in these activities.

### Activity 1: Questions about Emojis

*Purpose:* to encourage learners to talk about something as familiar as emojis and make them think about how emojis affect our communication skills; this exercise might be a warm-up before any other activity described in this article.

*Possible language points:* expressing opinions, showing interest, asking follow-up questions, and disagreeing politely

*Notes for teachers:* You might introduce the topic by asking learners general questions such as, "Do you use your phone a lot?" and "What do you usually do on your phone?" Someone is bound to mention texting, which gives you a smooth bridge into the activity.

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## Using and interpreting emojis correctly is a necessary, yet underestimated, soft skill.

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*Procedure:* Place the questions below on a slide or write them on the board for everyone to see. Divide learners into pairs or groups of three or four, and invite them to answer the questions in turns. Encourage learners to listen actively, ask follow-up questions, and debate politely in case of disagreement. As a follow-up after the discussion, invite learners to share their answers in an open-class feedback session.

Ask learners to answer the following questions:

- Do you use emojis when you text? Why or why not?
- Do you think that a message without emojis looks less friendly than a message with them?
- Do you normally use one emoji or several ones in a row?
- Do you think emojis help us convey our thoughts better?
- Do you think using emojis instead of words will eventually affect our speaking or writing skills? If so, how?

### Activity 2: Favourite Emojis

*Purpose:* for learners to make a mini-presentation and give an explanation of their favourite emojis

*Possible language points:* expressing opinions and giving examples

*Notes for teachers:* This activity is best conducted in pairs because it involves longer individual speaking turns. However, students might enjoy talking to more than one partner. If so, after a few minutes with one partner, students can move on to pair up with a new partner and repeat the activity.

*Procedure:* Ask learners to choose their top three favourite emojis and then to show these emojis to their partner(s). Invite the partners to ask questions to find out the following information about each emoji: (a) what the emoji means (i.e., a verbal interpretation of the symbol); (b) why it is one of their favourites (requiring students to express reasons and give support); and (c) when they use the emoji (students need to provide specific examples of the emoji's usage). Learners take turns asking other naturally occurring questions, debating meanings, and sharing personal anecdotes related to the use of the emojis.

Afterward, as a class, you might ask learners to think about and discuss the following:

- Which emojis were the most common?
- Did anyone choose the same three emojis as their partner?
- Were there questions or disagreements about the meanings of an emoji?
- Did anyone like an emoji that their partner had never seen before?

### Activity 3: Storytelling

*Purpose:* for learners to practice storytelling skills

*Possible language point:* practicing the correct usage of time sequencers and connectors

*Procedure:* Learners work in pairs. Ask learners to choose four to six emojis per pair, but don't tell them what for yet. When pairs have chosen their emojis, explain that they have to make up an associative story based on those emojis. Point out that the stories don't have to make logical sense or be conventionally

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structured as long as learners speak and communicate freely.

For instance, suppose the sequence is 🛸🌎🗽💎 (see Figure 1 for a larger display). Learners might say the following: *Once an alien came to Earth. The alien was hungry and tried a burrito in the United States of America. He liked it so much that he gave people on Earth diamonds from his home planet.*

As an extension, you might ask learners to write down the story and present it to or share it with the whole class.

Alternatively, divide learners into groups of three or four. Ask each member to choose three random emojis. When they are ready, tell the group to make up a story, taking turns and using one new emoji per person per turn.

#### **Activity 4: Guessing Game**

*Purpose:* to give learners free practice in using target language points

*Possible language points:* using phrases for guessing and responding to correct and incorrect guesses

*Procedure:* Prepare several emojis that can be associated with a famous movie, TV series,

book, or character. Ask learners to guess the association in pairs or groups; then compare answers as a class. If you wish to make this activity competitive, choose the winner by counting the number of correctly guessed items.

For example, the set of emojis shown in Figure 2 might be associated with the *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* film or book.

There are many ready-made pictures available online. For instance, Memolition offers a quiz with images representing 50 movies (see <https://memolition.com/2013/11/10/guess-the-50-movie-names-from-emoticons-and-smileys/>); you can search online for more. Use those pictures for inspiration or simply show them in class.

#### **Activity 5: How Would You React?**

*Purpose:* to give learners free practice with target language points

*Possible language points:* defining relative clauses and using phrases for expressing emotions

*Procedure:* Show learners a news article, a thought-provoking image, or a tweet. Ask them which emoji they would use to react to what you showed them—and make sure to



**Figure 1. A sequence of emojis that learners could use to create a story**

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**The activities in this article can be used as icebreakers, time fillers, or gamified rewards; they can also serve as the core of a lesson.**

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ask them to explain why. If you have a chat in a messenger app, such as WhatsApp, you can simply post something and ask learners to react with an emoji and explain their choice.

Try to avoid posts that will provoke a predictable reaction; instead, go for something that will get a discussion going. This, in its turn, may lead to a fruitful discussion. I have found news stories for this activity online, for example on the Breaking News English website ([breakingnewsenglish.com](http://breakingnewsenglish.com)).

**Activity 6: Describe Yourself with Emojis**

*Purpose:* for learners to practice language points in order to get to know each other better

*Possible language points:* using the present simple tense, lexis for talking about yourself, and lexis for expressing reasons

*Procedure:* Learners choose five emojis to describe themselves. The emojis could be related to learners' appearance, job, family, interests, and so on. As an icebreaker, you can (a) ask learners to show those emojis to others and talk about themselves using the emojis as prompts, or (b) let other participants guess what those emojis stand for. The guessing can be done in pairs so that students are forced to make their guesses and express their reasons to each other.

At the end, the class can go over the answers, and students can see if they guessed correctly.

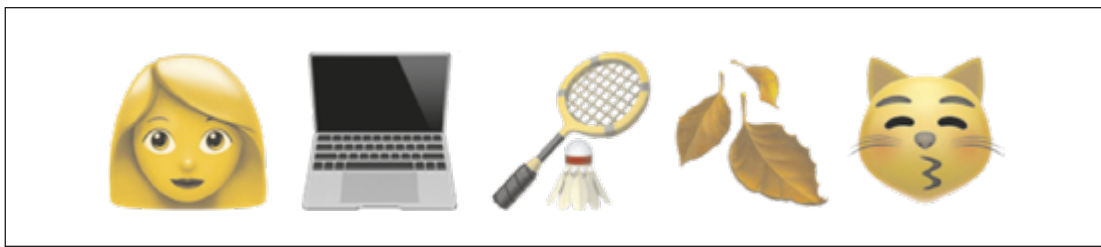
For example, my emojis could be the ones shown in Figure 3: I work online; I play badminton; I like autumn; I have a cat.

As an option, in a group where learners know each other well, you can ask learners to send those five emojis to you privately. Once you have collected emojis from all learners, put them into a numbered list without names, and show the emojis on the board for everyone to see and guess which series of emojis is related to which learner. To encourage speaking, you can ask learners to think aloud. For example, when they see my emojis, they may say: *I think this is Irina because I know she plays badminton, and she works online.*

If your learners already know basic information about each other, you can take this activity further. Ask learners to choose emojis to represent something deeper about themselves (a fond memory, a dream for the future, a personality trait they believe they have, etc.). Have them work in pairs—and then switch partners, if time allows—or mingle to discuss the emojis and their relevance, as described above. Ask for open-class feedback as a follow-up.



**Figure 2. A set of emojis that might be associated with a movie**



**Figure 3. A sample set of emojis that could “describe” a person**

### Activity 7: Create a New Emoji

*Purpose:* for learners to show their creativity through speaking

*Possible language points:* using language for hypothesizing and brainstorming (e.g., *what if, let’s, why don’t we, shall we*)

*Procedure:* Ask learners to create an emoji that doesn’t exist yet—one that they would find useful for certain situations. You could assign this as homework or as a group project in the classroom. Ask learners to follow these instructions:

- Think of a new emoji that doesn’t exist and make a sketch of it (or create a small poster).
- Discuss situations where this emoji could possibly be used; make a list of two or three situations.
- Write a sample text message and use the new emoji in the text.
- Present the emoji to the rest of the class. Describe it, give its meaning, and read out the sample text message. Answer questions from the audience.

As a follow-up, you could ask learners to identify which emojis they might actually use if they existed, and/or to compose an email to (for example) Apple or Google with the newly created emojis, and ask them to include those emojis in the emoji keyboard.

### CONCLUSION

As the activities above show, emojis can be easily and naturally incorporated into a lesson. Learners will undoubtedly find them relevant since so many people encounter emojis daily. The activities in this article can be used as icebreakers, time fillers, or gamified rewards; they can also serve as the core of a lesson. This selection of activities is not meant to be exhaustive, but these activities can serve as a springboard for teachers to tweak them as needed to accommodate their learners and their learning environment. Perhaps the best thing about “speaking + emojis” is that you essentially need nothing but a pen and paper to conduct a productive lesson that learners of all ages are likely to enjoy and remember.

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